

*america*

**Fatimah Asghar**

am I not your baby?  
brown & not allowed

my own language?  
my teeth pulled

from mouth, tongue  
bloated with corn syrup?

america, didn't you raise me?  
bomb the country of my fathers

& then tell me to go back to it?  
didn't you mold the men

who murder children in schools  
who spit at my bare arms

& uncovered head?  
america, wasn't it you?

who makes & remakes  
me orphan, who burns

my home, watches me rebuild  
& burns it down again?

wasn't it you, who uproots  
& mangles the addresses

until there are none  
until all I have are my own

hands & even those you've  
told me not to trust? america

don't turn your back on me.  
am I not your baby?

brown & bred to hate  
every inch of my skin?

didn't you raise me?  
didn't you tell me bootstraps

& then steal my shoes?  
didn't you make there no 'back'

for me to go back to?  
america, am I not your refugee?

who do I call mother, if not you?

## *Old Country*

### **Fatimah Asghar**

Old Country Buffet, where our family  
went on the days we saved enough money.  
Everyone was in a good mood, even Ullu—  
our uncle who never smiled or took off his coat

& dyed his hair black every two weeks  
so we couldn't tell how old he was. We marched  
single file towards the gigantic red lettering  
across the grueling parking lot to announce

our arrival. We, children carrying our rectangle  
backpacks brimming with homework, calculators  
& Lisa Frank trapper keepers, for we knew this was a day  
without escape, spread out across all the booths

possible while our family ate & ate & snuck  
food into the Tupperware they smuggled in  
& no matter how we begged & whined  
or the waitresses yelled or threatened to charge

us more money we weren't leaving  
until my greedy ass family had their fill.  
O, Old Country! The only place  
we could get dessert & eat as much of it

as we wanted before our actual meal.  
The only place we didn't have to eat all  
the meat on our plates or else we were accused  
of being wasteful, told our husbands

would have as many pimples as rice we left behind.  
Here, our family reveled in the American  
way of waste, manifest destined our way  
through the mac & cheese, & green bean

casseroles, mythical foods we had only  
heard about on TV where American  
children rolled their eyes in disgust. Here  
we learned how to say *I too have had meat loaf*

*& hate it*, evidence we could bring back  
to the lunch table as we guessed  
what the other kids ate as they scoffed  
at our biriyani. Here, the adults told

us if we didn't like the strawberry shortcake

we could eat the ice cream or jello we could  
get a whole plate just to try a bite  
to turn up our noses & that was fine.

Here we loosened the drawstrings  
on our shalwaars & gained ten pounds.  
Here we arrived at the beginning of lunch  
hour & stayed until dinner approached

until they made us leave. Here we learned  
how to be American & say:  
we got the money

we're here to stay.

## *When the Orders Came*

**Fatimah Asghar**

*“[We are] calling for a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States.”*

*—Trump’s administrative team, December 7, 2015*

they shipped us to the sanctuary camps  
& we forgot our other countries.

like good schoolchildren we sung  
the anthem loud, so loud  
until we could hear nothing else.

not the birds delighting  
over their young, or the dogs’ snarl  
at our feet, or him on the news

hourly, growling. this is the cost  
of looking the other way  
when they come for us:

I build safety inside you  
& wake in cuffs.  
I’m all mouth. every morning

I whisper *my country my country my country*  
& my hands stay empty.  
what is land but land? a camp

but a camp? sanctuary  
but another grave? I am an architect.  
I permission everything

into something new.  
I build & build  
& someone takes it away.

## *Charleston*

### **Cortney Lamar Charleston**

*for the innocents massacred at Mother Emmanuel AME Church*

Nine confirmed dead:                      the blue backlighting  
from the computer screen underscores their black faces  
and the rows of teeth therein lit like vigil candles.

Tonight, genuflect seems the fool's gambit —  
I recite their names one by one in the shape of a circle,  
but I don't receive an acknowledgement in thunder  
from above; I'm left only with the begging of two palms  
pressed together and the proof it wasn't enough.

My body, a stack of mirrors, falls through itself.  
I am several nouns over the course of descent:  
her silver whistle, her public library card,  
his set of starter hair clippers humming  
into the darkness with no plugs in a wall.

I crash through the grey of the matter, go  
cleanly through the roof of the church without  
making a hole tracing a curious sparrow,  
but like a holy bird, I land softly on my feet.

All the expected ornaments are here, I see —  
the stained-glass windows overlooking the pulpit,  
and two paintings of Christ on the adjacent walls,  
*Crucifixion* and *Resurrection*, and all nine  
of their bodies on the ground, not quite cold.

I pick up an annotated student Bible, looking  
for Jesus' words for Lazarus, but struggle  
because all the text inside is red, still fresh.

I move through the heart of the building, noting  
the belongings that will house their ghosts.

Here are the church fans for Sunday service  
next to her foot. Here is the sentimental wallet,  
holding the pictures of two blossoming girls.

Here is a small wooden cross affixed to a ring  
of keys that could open any of many doors.

Here, their scuffed glasses. His navy backpack,  
his Chicago Bulls snapback, his black and red Sony

headphones, familiar-looking, looping lyric — Nina,  
voice strained through wire, singing *blood on the leaves*,  
*blood on the leaves*, *blood on the leaves*, the bright  
face of his smartphone jukebox glowing unattended:

*Missed call: Tyrone.*

*Missed call: Torrence.*

*Missed call: Dominique.*

*Missed call: T.J.*

I pick up all their many things  
and lay them in a line at the altar.

I find cloth that had been reserved for clergy  
and choir in a closet close by, draw them over  
the six women and then the three men. I weep,  
and I weep and I weep. And I ask the rhetorical  
question *why?*, but this time, receive an answer:

*I'm here to kill*  
*black people*, he says —

standing behind me. I sweat a bead of blue light.  
The thunder enters the back of my head and exits  
my mouth in a manner of prayer. I disperse  
like a cloud split like lightning, charged electrically  
by race: I'm erased. Surely. Completely. Gone.

Like I wasn't even there  
like I wasn't  
even  
there.

## *Devotion (“I Am on the Battlefield for My Lord”)*

### **Cortney Lamar Charleston**

By way of my mother, the deacon with the slick gray hair and money clip in his pocket can claim a percentage of my body like tithe rights. And on this Sunday, as with every other Sunday, he is a slender ebony panel in the fence of faith, one man in the company of men standing shoulder to shoulder in suits, tapping their toes, clapping their hands, putting muscle to work in the making of praise music. We Baptists call this *devotion*, my working definition of which is *faithfulness to the light*. To the extent that God is as white as the clouds of heaven, this theory holds. To the extent these particular men are dark, I must consider other possibilities: that God remade himself in my image so that we could be closer or that devotion means *the commitment of black men to stand with one another*, form a barricade of soldiers against anything as necessary, the Lord being the force holding them fast in line. It isn't always easy for me to see these explanations as separate: any film, any photograph of Martin Luther King Jr. leading a march, with his position centered in a line of bodies covering the entire width of the frame — if I take a wide view of that scene, I see the Lord at work. If I zoom in, on a single person or the breach between two, I see no trace of the Lord at all, a hint that He can't exist in small spaces.

And what's more, consider this:

say Chicago PD pulls a long line of youths into the precinct for photographs — all of them dark, all of them wearing the same colors — and stands them shoulder to shoulder. Zoom in: nothing. Zoom out: the Lord? Why not? There's clearly commitment there, devotion. They're all definitely soldiers, on the battlefield for something: maybe it's white, maybe it's green, maybe it's a colorless feeling. I've got no good answers, only darkness. I'm still trying to decipher if it means anything that Dr. King lived in Vice Lords territory when he spent '66 in Chicago, that the words “vice” and “Lord” are affiliates, homeboys, next-door neighbors. I think about their coming up together in the mind of a boy living on that side of town, a percentage of his body, perhaps, claimed as a tax; I can't shake this feeling that when he throws his muscles into praise music, when sound leaves his precious mouth, people scatter. I can't help but believe our songs, to one another, would be familiar, church family:

*I am on the battlefield for my Lord  
I'm on the battlefield for my Lord  
and I promised Him that I  
would serve Him till I die  
till I die, till I die, till I die*



## *How Do You Raise a Black Child?*

**Cortney Lamar Charleston**

From the dead. With pallbearers who are half as young  
as their faces suggest and twice the oxen they should be.  
Without a daddy at all, or with a daddy in prison, or at home,  
or in a different home. With a mama. With a grandmama  
if mama ain't around, maybe even if she is. In a house, or not.  
In the hood. In the suburbs if you're smart or not afraid of white  
fear or even if you are. Taking risks. Scratching lottery tickets.  
Making big bets. On a basketball court. Inside a courtroom.  
*Poorly* in the ever-pathological court of opinion. On faith. Like  
a prayer from the belly of a whale. In church on Sunday morning,  
on Monday, Tuesday, and every other. Before school and after.  
In a school you hope doesn't fail. In a school of thought named  
for Frederick Douglass. Old school or not at all. With hip-hop or  
without. At least with a little Curtis Mayfield, some Motown,  
sounds by Sam Cooke. Eating that good down-home cooking.  
Putting some wood to their behind. With a switch. With a belt  
to keep their pants high. Not high all the time. On all-time highs  
at all times until they learn not to feel and think so lowly of  
their aims. To be six feet tall and not under. With a little elbow  
grease and some duct tape. Sweating bullets. On a short leash.  
Away from the big boys on the block. Away from the boys in blue.  
Without the frill of innocence. From the dead, again. Like a flag.

## *Bell Theory*

### Emily Jungmin Yoon

When I was laughed at for my clumsy English, I touched my throat.  
Which said *ear* when my ear said *year* and year after year  
I pronounced a new thing wrong and other throats laughed.  
*Elevator. Library.* Vibrating bells in their mouths.

How to say *azalea*. How to say *forsythia*.  
Say instead golden bells. Say *I'm in ESL*. In French class  
a boy whose last name is Kring called me *belle*.  
Called me by my Korean name, pronouncing it wrong.  
Called it loudly, called attention to my alien.

(I touched the globe moving in my throat, a hemisphere sinking.)

Called me across the field lined with golden bells.  
I wanted to run and be loved at the same time. By Kring.  
As in ring of people. *Where are you going? We're laughing with you.*  
The bell in our throat that rings with laughter is called uvula. From *uva*: grape.  
A theory: special to our species, this grape-bell has to do with speech.  
Which separates us from animals. Kring looked at me and said  
*Just curious, do you eat dogs?* and I wanted to end my small life.  
Be reborn a golden retriever of North America.  
Lie on a field lined with golden bells, loved.

Today, in a country where dogs are more cherished  
than a foreign child, an Oregon Senate candidate says no  
to refugees. Says, years ago, Vietnamese refugees ate dogs,  
*harvested* other people's pets. *Harvest* as in *harvest* grapes.  
*Harvest* as in *harvest* a field of golden rice. As do people  
from rice countries. As in people-eat-dog worlds.

Years ago, 1923 Japan, the phrase *jūgoen gojissen* was used  
to set apart Koreans: say *15 yen 50 sen*. The colonized who used the chaos  
of the Kanto Earthquake to poison waters, set fire: a cruelty special to our species.  
A cruelty special to our species — how to say *jūgo*, how to say *gojit*,  
how *jūgo* sounds like die in Korean, how *gojit* sounds like *lie* —  
*lie, lie, library, azalea, library.*

*I'm going to the library*, I lied, years ago, on a field lined with forsythia.

## *Testimonies – Pak Kyung-soon*

### **Emily Jungmin Yoon**

There was a man about 45 years of age with a mustache  
who told me to work for Japan  
and meet my brother in Hiroshima  
The man said my refusal might not be good for my parents  
The man and his men took me to Shimonoseki  
I was led into a room I was told to take a bath I was told  
to take off my clothes  
I only begged that I meet my brother  
When they finally took me to Hiroshima, my brother was alone  
in a big, empty room he  
asked if I came  
as a “comfort woman” and I promised  
I would return  
to see him again  
when flower buds were about to appear  
I was taken to Osaka In its room  
I was Number 10 I was then  
a “comfort woman”  
I became so sick with syphilis I could not walk  
One night an officer came and told me to get ready  
I was in such great pain the next thing I remember  
is arriving in Seoul It was June 1945  
Immediately I had a miscarriage  
The mustached man learned of my return  
told me to return to the “comfort station”  
To avoid the draft again I got married  
our new life a rented room  
I could smell the odor of my weekly “#606”  
arsenic for syphilis  
My baby discharged pus from his ears  
was called crazy  
My brother returned home with burns and lumps  
all over his body from radiation  
discharged disintegrated bone  
the size of teeth near his wounds  
The Japanese soldiers discharged  
discharge out of charge into  
every room